

*In wake of Pfizer settlement Thursday, Welch reiterates call for an end to drug company payments and gifts to doctors*

Rep. Peter Welch on Thursday reiterated his call for a ban on gifts pharmaceutical companies can give to doctors and urged the House Committee on Energy and Commerce to pass his amendment ending the practice.

Welch pointed to Thursday's announcement that Pfizer has agreed to pay a record \$2.3 billion to settle allegations of illegal marketing of a painkiller drug - including gifts of golf and massages - as an egregious example of some drug companies' efforts to influence doctors. While Pfizer violated existing, bare-bones laws restricting the marketing of drugs for uses the Food and Drug Administration has not approved, Welch has called for much stronger regulations.

Welch's amendment to pending health care legislation would ban drug companies from providing to doctors meals, travel, entertainment and other gifts worth more than five dollars. The provision was based on an innovative Vermont law banning gifts from drug companies to medical providers and requiring them to publicly disclose all payments to providers.

"As today's historic settlement demonstrates, some drug companies will go as far as it takes to influence how doctors prescribe medicine. Their practices are dishonest, wasteful and - most importantly - dangerous to patients," Welch said. "By banning gifts intended to influence doctors, we can ensure that medical professionals are making the best decisions for their patients - without undue influence from the pharmaceutical industry."

Of the \$29.8 billion drug companies spent on marketing in 2005, \$7.2 billion was directed toward physicians in the form of gifts, food, education, travel and consultancy fees, according to the Pew Prescription Project. In a review of 29 articles on the effect of industry interactions with doctors, the Journal of the American Medical Association found that those interactions led to increased prescription drug costs and an increase in the prescribing of drugs with no therapeutic advantage over the alternatives.

In the settlement announced Thursday, Pfizer was accused of paying doctors to attend consulting sessions at expensive resorts, where they pushed the prescription painkiller Bextra. Whistleblower and former Pfizer sales representative John Kopchinski said company managers urged him to engage in illegal efforts to market Bextra.

"The whole culture of Pfizer is driven by sales, and if you didn't sell drugs illegally, you were not seen as a team player," Kopchinski said, according to news reports.

In addition to the amendment banning gifts, Welch has also introduced an amendment that would allow states like Vermont to go beyond federal law and enact even stronger sunshine laws.